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L'altérité dans la culture canadienne

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Editors
Sous la direction de
Vladislava Felbabov
Jelena Novaković



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OTHER HUNGARIANS IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

"There are times like always
when we feel as if we are immigrants in ourselves"
Endre Farkas, 60

Sandor Hunyadi is a household name for all those who study ethnic writing in Canada – the hero of *Under the Ribs of Death* by John Marlyn has become one of the *par excellence* figures of ambitious immigrants who are ready to sacrifice everything in order to be accepted by the majority. During the almost fifty years since the first publication of this novel, several studies have analyzed it from various aspects therefore I do not wish to dwell on it at length. Suffice it to say for our purposes that Marlyn, an immigrant himself, portrayed ethnic communities and the hardships of newcomers, as well as the wish to break out from the ghetto based on his personal experiences during the years of the Great Depression. The novel is written in standard English, with dialogues suggesting the pronunciation of various immigrant groups (German, Hungarian, Ukrainian).

In the second half of the twentieth century, several other works, mainly novels, mention Hungarians among other immigrant groups (e. g. *Big Lonely* by James Bacque, *La guerre, Yes, Sir!* by Roch Carrier, etc.). *In Praise of Older Women. The Recollections of Andrew Vajda* (1967) by Stephen Vizinczey became a best-seller and this novel leads us to another stereotype of Hungarian character, namely that of the sensual lover – John Miska elaborates on this feature in his study *Jelenlétünk Kanadában*. It is this aspect

that I wish to further investigate, based on works published after 1990 by non-Hungarian writers in Canada.

With regard to the central topic of this conference, it seems appropriate to examine the problematics of 'the other' and how it is present in Canadian literature – but Tzvetan Todorov, in his *The Conquest of America. The question of the other* has already set up a typology that can serve as useful starting point and I have already published a paper on "Images of 'the Other' in Canadian Literature", so this time I would like to concentrate on two recently published works that show a different approach. Before speaking about *Self* by Yann Martel and *Poèmes perdues en Hongrie* by Danielle Fournier, let me briefly mention that Margaret Atwood in her short story *Wilderness Tips* creates George, a mysterious character, who does not wish to reveal the secret of his past. In the course of the story it turns out that he has had an affair with both sisters of his present wife. George gives away his Hungarian background only by a spontaneous light blasphemy 'Fene egye meg!' (192). He turns out to be not only a seducer but also an irresistibly sensuous man.

During the past year, Yann Martel has received considerable media coverage thanks to being awarded Booker Prize for his second novel *Life of Pi* and the plagiarism accusation of Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar. Martel (born in 1963) with this prize-winning novel – which was short listed for the Governor General's Award, too – was compared to Joseph Conrad, Salman Rushdie as well as to Ernest Hemingway, Jorge Amado, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Samuel Beckett (*Toronto Star*, Dec. 19, 2001). A puzzling list of predecessors, but a good appetizer. However, big as the temptation to compare or analyze the two novels by Martel is, let me turn to *Self*, his first novel, written in 1996, which was short listed for Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award since this is the one with a Hungarian character in it.

I presume I am not mistaken when I think that this novel is unfamiliar to most readers, so let me say a few words about it. Martel was born in Salamanca, Spain, both his parents being civil servants, more specifically, diplomats – most biographical notes put it as "born in Spain in 1963 of peripatetic Canadian parents. He grew up in Alaska, British Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Ontario and Mexico, and has continued travelling as an adult, spending time in Iran, Turkey and India." (www.randomhouse.ca). He grew up in a plurilingual milieu – his mother tongues are French, English and Spanish. His father, Emile Martel from the Province of Quebec is one-time winner of the Governor General's Award for poetry.

He first published a volume of short stories, entitled *Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamations*, 1993 – the title story won Journey Prize.

Vintage Canada advertises *Self* as "A modern-day Orlando – edgy, funny and startlingly honest – [...] the fictional autobiography of a young writer and

traveller who finds his gender changed overnight." *L'Humanite* wrote that "The name of the greatest living writer of the generation born in the sixties is Yann Martel." Other reviews called it "A powerful story, punctuated by humour and tragedy in much the way real life is. – Like Rohinton Mistry and Michael Ondaatje, Martel is a brilliant storyteller." (*Vancouver Sun*). "Superb – Masterfully written. – Martel has an almost otherworldly talent. – He is a powerful writer and storyteller" (*Edmonton Journal*) "Yann Martel wonderfully represents the child's universe as a seamless whole. ... [Martel] is a natural and often brilliant essayist and expositor, with ... a rich cultural and literary foundation." (*The Globe and Mail*) "Mesmerizing... Linguistic treats dance across the page, and the subject – a young person's life – careens between the remarkably realistic and the wildly imaginative... Martel is a gifted writer: his language saunters and soars." (*Calgary Herald*). "This is an exhilarating piece of fiction,... bold and original ... Superb, psychologically acute observations on love, attraction and belonging... An intelligent and entertaining meditation on sexuality, language and identity, the nature of longing, and on the very process of creating things: selves, characters and novels." (Charles Foran, *Montreal Gazette*). "A narrative orchestrated by an outspoken 'I' that is candid, intelligent, likable, life-embracing, protean, chatty, smug, and mischievous... Martel is a bright, amiable, enthusiastic writer with an original, playful mind that he is not afraid to use..." (*Quill & Quire*).

After these raving reviews, let me quote the author himself who in an interview said, "It's a terrible novel. I think it should disappear. Parts of it are good, but overall I don't like it."¹ Julian Ferraro in *TLS* was almost as negative as the writer himself half a decade after the publication of his first novel. In Ferraro's view

"the absence of structure [is] emphasized by the stagy imbalance between the book's first "chapter" of 329 pages and its second of forty-three words... the conventions of traditional "masculine" narrative development are challenged by a more circular, open-ended, "feminine" unfolding. The result is a novel which rejects plot and character and focuses instead on experience; on the interaction of an evolving individual consciousness with the random contingencies of existence... A recurring element... [is the] outlines of ideas for novels, plays and short stories... At the heart of the book is an interesting idea well realized – the changes in sex, each one following a particularly traumatic event... Surrounding this, however, is a mass of filler that is often simply dull. The abiding impression of *Self* is of a potentially excellent short story... one of Martel's characteristic stylistic devices,

¹ www.bookmagazine.com/issue25/martel.shtml

the bifurcation of the narrative into two columns running down the page..."

Let us look behind these diverging opinions. *Self* is the first-person singular story of a young man, an aspiring writer, who lived in different countries in his childhood and after both his parents were lost in a plane crash, overnight turned into an adolescent girl with all the complications of that age. The protagonist went to college, then university, had several love-affairs – e. g. with one of the professors, then a Lesbian relationship on a European tour – and found true love in Montreal with Tito Imilac.

"He was of Hungarian origin, but not from Hungary. He was from the minority that lives in Czechoslovakia, in south-Western Slovakia. He and his mother had come over in 1968, right after the Soviet invasion, when he was fifteen. They had settled in Toronto. (Father not mentioned. I found out later that he stayed behind, was a liberal apparatchik hoped, fared miserable, died of cancer)" (250).

This 'invisible man' – as Tito defined himself – introduced the hero(ine) of the novel not only the typical immigrant community but also to the treasures of real and fictitious Hungarian culture. Language, of course, was not only a tool for communication, but also a topic for conversation.

"Tito's French was better than functional... But rapid-fire Quebec French lost him. If he handled Hungarian like his bare hands, English like worn-in leather gloves, Slovak like mitts, German and Russian like knives and forks, then French he handled like chopsticks" (259).

Participating in family events "it was *de rigueur* that Magyar be spoken... I remembered in my own case how it was inconceivable that I should have addressed my parents in English. Our relationship was a French-speaking relationship" (262). The plurilingual upbringing of the hero of this autobiographical novel and of the young man from Bratislava mean an important parallel between them. This plurilingual approach is present all through the novel: depending on the location of the episode in this modern Orlando's life, passages in the base language (English) and the other one (Spanish, pp. 88–89, French, pp. 107–108) occur side by side (literally) with equivalent meaning. In the case of Hungarian, this "spectacularly incomprehensible" (263) language, however, Martel chose a different strategy. The whole novel is very rich in literary and artistic references – here we can read parts from Bartók's opera, *Bluebeard's Castle* in Hungarian (Tito's mother is also called Judit) while the English column is about her impressions about Hungarians living in Canada.

Their infinite-looking happiness came to tragic end when the girl (pregnant with Tito's child) was brutally attacked and then raped by a neighbour, after which she never dared to face her lover – and returned to the original gender, i.e. young man. "My emerging penis revolted me... I lost my baby, my child,

my future." (313) "I left Montreal – left my life – abruptly and untidily. I stuffed my backpack with my novel and clothes (and, without thinking, tampons), and departed. Not a word to the restaurant or to the Hungarian community... For my dear Tito, a scrawled note, the hardest words I ever had to write" (325).

The novel closes with the already mentioned 43 words of chapter two:

"I am thirty years old. I weigh 139 pounds. I am five foot seven and a half inches tall. My hair is brown and curly. My eyes are grey-blue. My blood type is 0 positive. I am Canadian. I speak English and French" (331).

A highly unusual novel, I admit. What I found interesting in it was that Martel (who would qualify as 'mainstream Canadian author') used many strategies that are usually considered typical of 'ethnic writing', including biographical elements, real and imaginary journeys between countries, cultures, languages, code-switching and characters from ethnic communities – in the latter case as equal partners and not as 'exotic' creatures.

After this exciting novel, let me write a few words about a volume of poetry, also linked to Hungarians – more specifically, to Hungary. *Poèmes perdus en Hongrie* by Danielle Fournier are the result of a semester of guest teaching in Pécs and Piliscsaba (it is dedicated to Eva Martonyi). In October 2003, this volume was among the prize-winning books awarded by the 'Académie des lettres' at the Salon du livre de Montréal: Danielle Fournier received the Prix Alain-Grandbois. The poet (born in 1955) lives and teaches in Montreal. Her last volume of poetry is divided into two parts, with three 'chapters' in the first and four in the second part. The title evokes the intellectual milieu of the 1960s when 'found' places for theatrical activities and 'found' texts in writing were popular among experimenting artists – Fournier, however, published 'lost' poems. It is hard to define this unusual work: it has a loose structure, very often reminding of automatic writing ("j'écris comme je respire", 70) rich in allusions and citations from writers and philosophers (Mircea Eliade, Dezso Kosztolanyi, the tectonic plaques by Robert Lepage) – and it is also an 'enquête' into the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the writer. The autobiographical element is underlined in this work, too. Hungary – and a fictional Hungarian lover? – serve as starting point for this discovery. My country is present partly as references to place-names, partly as short Hungarian phrases implanted into the French text.

"moi, longtemps par les forces obscure hantée,
rompue aux caresses refusées, puis assis dans le
Bastion des Pêcheurs. Une. Désespérément une
À explorer cette langue que je tente de libérer du
Bout des doigts. Toutes amours déployées, arra-
chées aux tempêtes de sable, je me rends à vous.

Her most frequently used images are linked to the wind, to bones, various parts of the body, with a special stress on tongue (in both meanings of the word) and on fingers. These are intertwined with the central motif of spiritual and corporal love and the desire to write: ("Pour écrire, il faut aimer l'amour." 72). Both writing and fulfilling love involve struggle and the volume can be viewed as a documentation of this struggle, in which the opposites of man and woman, body and language, East and West are underlined. ("*sous tes cris Mozart devient Kodály*" 139) Trying to understand a completely, different strange language and the different body of the man complement each other.

At this point, I should draw some conclusion or establish a typology – but I have to admit that this paper is meant more as sharing some ideas about *Self* by Yann Martel and *Poèmes perdus en Hongrie* by Danielle Fournier than coming up with a ready made theory about this interesting phenomenon in Canadian writing.

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